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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 001423

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BOSNIA - MUNICIPAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN OFFICIALY  
OPENS

REF: A) SARAJEVO 1417 B) SARAJEVO 1222 C) SARAJEVO  
1260 D) SARAJEVO 971 E) SARAJEVO 290

Classified By: Michael J. Murphy, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The campaign season officially opened today (September 5) for Bosnia's October 5 municipal elections. Although municipal-level party officials tell us their campaigns will focus on local-level issues, party leaders have already begun trying to capture votes by focusing on divisive state-level issues and appealing to nationalist sentiment. We do not expect the election to produce any major political shocks. That said, the elections could strengthen the hand of Republika Srpska Prime Minister (RS PM) Milorad Dodik if, as expected, his party captures more mayoral positions in the RS. A poor performance by the Bosniak Party for Democratic Action (SDA) could further weaken party president Sulejman Tihic and strengthen the party's nationalist wing. Competition among Croat parties is manifesting itself in increasingly nationalist rhetoric -- including calls for a third entity -- designed to cast each party as the strongest defender of Croat interests. END SUMMARY

What Bosnians are Voting For  
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12. (SBU) The campaign for the October 5 municipal elections officially began today (September 5), though parties have been engaged in an unofficial campaign for several weeks now. This is the fourth round of municipal elections since the signing of Dayton in 1995. Voters in all 141 municipalities and Brcko District will elect candidates for municipal assemblies and councils, municipal mayors, the Brcko District Assembly, the Mostar City Council, and the Banja Luka City Assembly and mayor. Brcko and Mostar are the only two localities in Bosnia where mayors are not directly elected, but rather appointed by the ruling party or coalition. (Note: The contest in Srebrenica also will be a key element in this year's elections. We will provide a detailed assessment of the Srebrenica pre-election environment septel. End Note) The official campaign runs through October 3; between October 4 and 5 the parties are required by law to refrain from campaigning. Just over three million Bosnians registered to vote (up from 2,700,000 in 2006), including roughly 33,000 living abroad who will vote by mail (up from 32,000 in 2006).

Party Leaders Appeal to Nationalism  
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13. (C) Although municipal-level party officials tell us their

campaigns will focus on local-level issues, party leaders are seeking to mobilize their voters by focusing on state-level issues and appealing to nationalist sentiment. In recent weeks, RS PM Dodik has trumpeted his party's credentials as defenders of the RS and speculated publicly about RS independence. HDZ-1990 President and Minister of Transportation and Communications Bozo Ljubic called for the creation of a third, Croat-majority entity at an August 29 "pre-election" rally. Moreover, recent events -- primarily the arrest of Radovan Karadzic, the impending trial of the "Algerian Six," and the battle to secure diplomas for Bosniak students at the Stolac secondary school -- have figured into pre-election rhetoric by leaders of all parties (Refs A, B, and C).

#### Serbs: No Challenge to Dodik

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14. (C) Dodik's Alliance for Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) holds 18 mayoralties, 17 in the RS and 1 in the Federation, Bosanski Petrovac. SNSD's main rival, the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), holds 32. Although SNSD's popularity has declined from its late 2006/early 2007 stratospheric heights, the party and Dodik still enjoy widespread support in the RS. SNSD's aim is to expand its municipal-level government representation and consolidate the gains it made in the 2006 general elections. With this in mind, SNSD is targeting major SDS municipalities, such as Doboje and Bijeljina; it is not seriously contesting SDS's rural strongholds in the Eastern RS. Most observers expect SNSD to increase the number of municipalities it controls because the

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SDS and others have been unable to mount a serious challenge to SNSD's dominance of the RS.

#### Bosniaks: An SDA-SDP Face Off

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15. (C) Among the Bosniak parties, the Party for Democratic Action (SDA) currently holds 33 mayoralties (32 in the Federation; 1 in the RS, Srebrenica), the Party for BiH (SBiH) of Bosniak member of the Tri-Presidency Haris Silajdzic holds two (both in the Federation), and the self-described multi-ethnic -- but predominantly Bosniak -- Social Democratic Party (SDP) holds 11 (all in the Federation). The popularity of Silajdzic and his party has steadily declined over the last 18 months, and Silajdzic has devoted little time and energy to the municipal elections. He reportedly told SBiH officials who were urging him to play a more active role in SBiH's campaign that, as Chairman of the Presidency, he had "more important issues" to address. SBiH officials outside Sarajevo have blamed Silajdzic's approach for their campaign's lack of visibility among voters.

16. (C) If SBiH remains plagued by declining poll numbers and a disinterested party president, the competition for Bosniak votes within the Federation will be between SDA and SDP. (Note: SDA and SBiH are running as a coalition in the RS. End Note) SDA's campaign has been hampered by rifts within the party, the origins of which date back to Tihic's extremely poor showing in the 2006 election for the Bosniak member of the Tri-Presidency. Two splinter parties have emerged from SDA over the last year, and some predict this could hurt SDA at the polls and further weaken Tihic. Some within SDA's more hard-line, anti-Tihic wing, nominally led by Bakir Izetbegovic, are challenging Tihic by pushing for a more nationalistic campaign that would demonstrate SDA's ability to stand up to growing Serb nationalism.

17. (C) SDP Secretary General Nermin Niksic told us that SDP hopes to capitalize on SDA's internal division and that the party is conducting an aggressive "get-out-the-vote" campaign. SDP is strongest in the urban municipalities of Tuzla and Sarajevo Cantons, and it is in Sarajevo that the

party hopes to make its biggest gains at SDA's expense. SDP has had some success by tapping into voter anger over a proposal to raise parliamentary salaries and a series of dramatic criminal incidents in Sarajevo Canton (Refs D and E).

#### Croats: HDZs Escalate Nationalist Rhetoric

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18. (C) Among the Croat political parties, the Croat Democratic Union-BiH (HDZ-BiH) holds 20 mayoralties (all in the Federation). Its chief rival, the splinter party HDZ-1990, holds two. (Note: HDZ-1990 split from HDZ in 2006 and therefore did not compete in the 2004 municipal elections. End Note) Though there was some discussion between HDZ-BiH and HDZ-1990 about reunification prior to the start of the election campaign, the two parties will run separately in Croat-majority regions. (Note: The HDZs will run together, along with another small Croat party, in the RS. End Note) The HDZs, running on largely similar platforms, have mainly pitched themselves as the stronger defenders of Croat interests. HDZ-1990's appeal to Croat nationalism--particularly the call for a third entity--has been the most blatant. The split among Croats could allow the Bosniaks to win control of some mixed Bosniak-Croat municipalities, such as Vitez.

#### Comment

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19. (C) We anticipate the nationalist rhetoric will intensify as the campaign unfolds. Unrelated events, such as the verdict in the ICTY trial of Bosniak wartime commander Rasim Delic -- scheduled for September 15 -- could provide even more fodder for Bosniak and Serb nationalists. At this point, though, few observers expect the elections to radically transform the fortunes of the major political parties. That said, the intensified rhetoric will undoubtedly contribute to further polarization of the Bosnian political scene.

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